

Maintaining a Christian Institutional Identity While Embracing Religious Diversity

Dara Wakefield

A great number of private colleges and universities in the United States are the products of the Piety Movement and the Great Awakening during the mid 1700s.¹ A review of the histories of the nation's colleges and universities reveals that Christian ministers and missionaries had a tremendous influence on higher education in the United States. Over 70% of *U.S. News and World Report's* top 50 national liberal arts colleges have early connections with Christianity.² To varying degrees, these colleges have had to reconcile their Christian roots to an increasingly pluralistic, diverse and disbelieving society.

Colleges with Christian traditions may face increasing tensions if they adhere to doctrinal mission statements while embracing religious diversity. A review of the websites of *U. S. News and World Report's* top 50 liberal arts colleges reveals that all have religious diversity statements. Colleges with Christian ties have historically supported religious and intellectual freedom in higher education. These same colleges now struggle with interpreting their Christian traditions in a culture dominated by religious diversity and skepticism. Many have chosen to exit the struggle, secularize and relegate their Christian heritage to historical footnotes. "Keeping the faith" is increasingly unpopular in the culture of academia. Those with sincerely held religious beliefs in secularized schools hope for the tolerance accorded atheists and agnostics.³

Nel Noddings, in *Dialogue between Believers and Unbelievers*, suggests believers and unbelievers may unite intellectually and even grow together⁴, yet the idealism of faith communities and the realism of intellectual communities often generate friction while traveling down the same road. Christianity's mandate to confront and transform culture is surely at the heart of interfaith conflict.⁵ The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches social responsibility, condemnation of immorality, and cultural transformation.

If a significant portion of a college's student body embraces the notion of Christianity as a cultural transformer, transformation strategies become important to the college. Daniel Schipani encourages Christians to be "bilin-

gual,” having the ability to communicate without offending one another and in a culture of disbelief.⁶ Those who choose to question the cultural status quo should do so in a way that allows them to continue to live well and rightly among those with other convictions.⁷

“Christian in Spirit”

Nearly a century ago Martha Berry began a Sunday School for rural children in the foothills of northwest Georgia’s mountains. Berry’s ministry expanded to literacy and vocational training because public education was virtually nonexistent for her mountain children. Her Sunday School grew to become one of the premier liberal arts colleges in the South. “Not to be served, but to serve” was Martha Berry’s motto. Committed to educating the head, heart and hands, Berry’s vision captured the hearts of presidents, philanthropists, and a nation. Kane’s *Miracle in the Mountains* chronicles the growth of her mountain Sunday School into one of the South’s leading liberal arts colleges.⁸

Berry’s original 1903 charter states: “Said School shall forever remain undenominational, except that the Bible shall be taught; the teachers shall be members of some protestant Church, and the training of scholars shall be with the view to aid in their moral, industrial, and educational uplifting.”⁹ This charter was revised in 1962 and the previous phrase was replaced with “The college and other educational agency or agencies maintained by the corporation shall forever be Christian in spirit and democratic in procedure.”¹⁰

There is a subtle distinction between a “Christian college” and a college that is “Christian in spirit.” Berry College is unique among Christian colleges and universities because it has no denominational affiliations nor sponsoring religious body. “Christian in spirit” best describes the ethos of the college. External organizations neither influence, nor govern the spiritual journey of administrators, faculty, staff or students. Berry College has no statement of faith. In this sense, it is not a “Christian college.” The college owes no allegiance to any congregation, church or convention. Berry College’s lack of a creed or faith statement ensures religious freedom. The spiritual culture of the college is a direct reflection of those who are involved in its life. Martha Berry’s theological-philosophical disposition placed emphasis on actions, not labels. Thus, the reputation of Berry College rests not upon its religious affiliations, but upon the policies of its trustees and the actions of its administrators, faculty, staff, students and alumni.

Dr. Scott Colley, President of Berry College, in his explanation of the institution’s mission and purpose states, “An essential part of a sound edu-

cation is the opportunity to explore religious faith and to relate faith and learning responsibly and intelligently, and we dedicate ourselves to providing these opportunities. The college is dedicated to the interdenominational Christian commitment found in its tradition.”¹¹

Berry “is a specifically Christian institution in purpose, although non-sectarian in character.”¹² Berry College unabashedly embraces a spiritual mission in many of its institutional documents. *Renewing Our Mission: Berry College Strategic Plan, 2002-2012*, adopted by the Board of Trustees in December 2001, affirms Berry College is a comprehensive liberal-arts college based upon Christian principles.¹³ Further, the introduction to the student catalogue states:

“Berry students are offered a variety of opportunities for independent spiritual growth. An interdenominational Christian congregation on campus provides for Sunday worship involving students, faculty and staff. Fourteen active religious-life organizations provide enriching interfaith experiences. The resident chaplain provides spiritual counseling as well as opportunities for volunteer service and participation in local area religious activities.”¹⁴

Four chapels exist on campus: Possum Trot, established in 1850, where Martha began her Sunday School in 1900, Barnwell Chapel, built in 1911, Berry College Chapel, built in 1915, and Frost Memorial Chapel, built in 1937.¹⁵ Berry Chapel is centrally located on campus and serves as the “campus church” with a registered membership, weekly Bible studies and interdenominational worship services. Martha Berry’s final resting place is adjacent to the chapel. The college chaplain serves as the pastor of Berry Chapel and minister to all Berry students.

The Higher Education Research Institute surveyed 3680 freshmen at “highly selective” non-sectarian four-year institutions and compared them with Berry freshmen. According to the Institute’s *American Freshman National Norms for Fall 2001*:

“Berry freshmen are six times more likely to be Baptist (41% vs. 7%), almost three times more likely to be a Methodist (17% vs. 6%), and much less likely to be Catholic (10% vs. 26%) than the national sample. Many of our entering students say they are “born-again Christians” (64% vs. 24%). When ranking themselves in the top 10% among

their peers, Berry freshmen say they rank high for “religiousness” (57% vs. 32%) and “spirituality” (65% vs. 41%).”¹⁶

In a Berry College poll conducted in January of 2002 by the Chaplain’s Office, 89.1% of a sample of 531 Berry students representing all four classes said they were Christian, and a third identified themselves as “born again.” The on-campus poll reported 10% were Catholic. Three Moslem students and one Jewish student were also included in the survey.¹⁷

The faculty and administration represent an interdenominational and interfaith community. As will be seen later, the distinction between interdenominational and interfaith is worth noting. Administration and faculty represent a far more religiously diverse group than the student body. Though most of the administration and faculty are from Christian backgrounds, Buddhists, Jews, Moslems and other religious faiths are represented.

According to the college’s newly approved strategic plan, Berry “welcomes individuals of diverse backgrounds into the campus community.”¹⁸ The second goal of the planning document expresses a need for the institution to “broaden the scope of opportunities for students to experience spiritual growth.”¹⁹ Berry is anxious to open its doors to those of different cultures and religions to enhance global understanding and enrich the educational experiences of all.

September 11, 2001—An Interfaith Dilemma

Administrators, faculty, staff and students faced a dilemma when Berry’s northwest Georgia interdenominational Christian heritage clashed with its expanding global mission and commitment to those of all religious and cultural backgrounds. On September 11, 2001, some came face-to-face with religious pluralism during an interfaith service held in Berry Chapel in response to the terrible event of that day.

The September 27, 2001 edition of the *Campus Carrier* ran a lead story entitled, “Interfaith Prayer Service Controversial.” According to Berry’s college chaplain “. . . the complaints have come from students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni, and have focused on two claims: the chapel should be for Christian worship only, and Christians should not take part in a service that includes prayers to other gods.”²⁰ One senior said she “felt the chapel should be for Christian worship and the service was the equivalent of idol worship. Some students were offended enough to leave the service early.”²¹

A campus-wide debate ensued: Were Christians intolerant of other faiths or were those of other faiths intolerant of Christians? Few condemned the idea of an interfaith prayer service; the problem for some lay with having the service in a Christian sanctuary. The poles of the debate were evident: Some felt those who insisted Berry Chapel be used exclusively for Christian activities were being intolerant, selfish, and close-minded. Others felt it was blasphemy, or at least shameful, to have those of other religions praying in a Christian sanctuary. Those holding the middle ground felt that “tolerance” should incorporate being sensitive to the religious scruples of all, including “close-minded, fundamentalist Christians.” Some feared the college had forsaken its founding spiritual identity, while others feared the college had forsaken openness to the religious scruples of others.

The October 11 issue of *Campus Carrier* included a letter to the editor signed by 37 (of approximately 600) faculty and staff. The letter noted: “We accept that some are concerned over whether the chapel, as a consecrated space, should be reserved for Christian worship. Ideally, perhaps, another venue for the [interfaith] service would have been better.”²² An apology was offered to those of other faiths who were invited to pray and were then criticized for doing so. The letter closed with words of thanks and support for the interfaith service.

This event generated numerous real and virtual discussion forums. What was the meaning of tolerance? Who should tolerate whom? Does complete tolerance compromise one’s integrity? A healthy and meaningful conversation regarding the college’s “Christian spirit” and openness to diverse populations ensued among trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students.

Tolerance Discussion Re-ignited

Discussion groups and various email streams addressing tolerance issues began to wane until one Sunday morning early in the spring semester when a guest speaker at Berry Chapel presented a sanctity of life program and distributed pro-life flyers. Pro-choice faculty who were not Berry Chapel members heard about the pro-life service and deemed it inappropriate. The pro-choice faculty suggested such a service amounted to an institutional endorsement of a pro-life stance. The college chaplain, Berry Chapel members and others suspected religious tolerance might be lacking.

Historically, the Mount Berry Church has functioned as an autonomous interdenominational congregation with a registered membership and the campus chaplain as minister. Students, faculty, staff and administrators attending the Mount Berry Church do so voluntarily and congregate loosely according to common faith and practice. Traditionally, the Mount Berry

Church has shared in the responsibility of calling the college's chaplain. Berry's chaplain has had a dual role: minister of the Mount Berry Church and campus minister to all college students. As campus minister the chaplain coordinates religious life activities and is available for counseling.

In February, the pro-choice faculty members brought a motion before the faculty colloquium to request the administration speak to the college chaplain and enforce a religious diversity policy in the use of the Berry chapel, in effect requiring the Mount Berry Church to become an interfaith congregation. The motion died without resolution, but once again ignited the tolerance discussion and brought the college chaplain under fire for allegedly advocating a hyper-evangelical agenda. In the following weeks the administration, chaplain and others reconsidered the role of the chaplain at Berry College.

President's Fireside Chat

The President of the college, Dr. Scott Colley, called an informal "fireside chat" with the faculty to discuss the ongoing interfaith dialogue and address questions and concerns.²³ He reviewed his comments in the following memo to faculty and staff on March 13, 2002.

On March 6, I met with a good-sized group of faculty and staff members for a "fireside chat" about religious life at Berry. This meeting followed months of related campus discussions. I began the session by sharing two statistical profiles of Berry students that identify them as church-going and largely conservative Christians. I also shared President Leland Green's 1943 statement about religious freedom at Berry and his defense of "alternate paths to the Eternal."

Some participants at the fireside chat spoke of a tension between Berry's identity as "Christian in spirit" and the college's goals for diversity: "Is there a conflict between the evangelical impulse central to some interpretations of Christianity and the college's commitment to being inviting and welcoming to people of many backgrounds?" We spent a little over an hour addressing that and related questions.

We were reminded that many denominational groups, as well as other Christian campus groups like "Exaltation" and the "Worship Band," sponsor chapel services. The major

question for many was whether we are providing support to students who are “seekers and searchers” or who are affiliated with religious traditions other than Christianity. Indeed, is Berry a congenial and welcoming place for students who do not identify themselves as Christian?

Several people argued that, of all places, a college should help make it possible for students to seek and search without feeling unnecessarily alienated. (The group also recognized that stress and strain, including periods of some alienation, are to be expected within the age group of our students.) The question we ended up asking ourselves was “Are we doing all we should to create an atmosphere in which students can feel free to explore their beliefs in ways other than those offered in presently constituted Christian or religion-in-life groups?” Many people appeared to think that creating such an atmosphere would reflect and enhance, rather than compromise, the college’s commitment to being Christian in spirit.

We also asked ourselves “Do we know enough about interactions in residence halls and the dining hall when students chat informally about religion?” Are non-fundamentalist students made to feel uncomfortable by those who are? Or vice versa? Do we have, in fact, an unwelcoming atmosphere on this campus? Several colleagues said they were willing to conduct the research to help us reach valid conclusions about this last issue, a project that will take place during the next academic year.

There remains considerable faculty and staff support for remaining true to our Christian foundation, our responsibility to students of various beliefs and our duty to make good President Green’s defense of religious freedom. Many of us see the value in keeping this discussion alive.²⁴

At the end of the spring semester the college chaplain announced his acceptance of a position at another college. The chaplain’s departure took place in an atmosphere of mutual appreciation as members of the administration, faculty, staff and students bade him a fond farewell. The semester ended on a peaceful note and faculty members, staff and students entered their summer schedules.

Seven College Chaplains Speak

The author contacted chaplains of several colleges to ascertain whether they were experiencing problems similar to Berry. All of the chaplains' colleges appeared in *U. S. News and World Report's* college index.²⁵ They represented colleges and universities with student populations of 1000 to 13,000. Six of the chaplains served denominational schools, the remaining one served in an interdenominational setting. The chaplains spoke on the condition of anonymity. The chaplains' colleges and universities were located in the eastern, southern, mid-western and western states.

Chaplains were chosen because of their intimate knowledge of religious life on their campuses. These chaplains do not represent a statistically significant portion of the entire population of Christian colleges, but suggest a starting place for those who might wish to pursue this subject further. The chaplains and campus ministers discussed institutional mission statements, religious diversity policies, interfaith relations and use of Christian chapels for interfaith activities. Chaplains commented on the accommodation of non-Christian groups on their campuses. Time, resources and logistics dictated the limits of this study. Though responses were limited, the chaplains' insights on interfaith relations are worth noting.

All of the chaplains reported their schools had Christian mission statements, though three did not have religious tolerance statements. Only one college had non-Christian students exceeding five percent of the total student body. All campuses had college churches or chapels, but only two used their chapels for interfaith religious activities. Six of the seven chaplains stated their colleges did not sponsor non-Christian religious activities. One campus had a space dedicated solely to interfaith activities. One campus had a campus policy regarding "witnessing"—attempting to persuade others to convert to another faith.

None of the chaplains interviewed had experienced any interfaith issues similar to those experienced at Berry. The reasons for this became apparent during the interviews. These colleges avoided tolerance issues by keeping the various non-Christians' religious practices autonomous and private. Christian and non-Christian groups often cooperated in volunteer service opportunities and had access to campus facilities. If interfaith activities were held, they were strictly voluntary and conducted at a religiously neutral site. Though one campus had non-Christian groups meeting in their chapel, their schedules did not coincide with Christian meetings. One chaplain said an interfaith council screened most of the religious activities on his campus to ensure interfaith respect and cooperation.

Six of the chaplains stated their schools officially or semi-officially support denominational activities. Other religious activities take place, but do not have the same institutional support. When asked how non-Christian faculty responded to Christianity's privileged status, one chaplain stated his institution's hiring practices ensured the majority of the faculty agreed with the university's religious heritage and mission statement. Another emphasized the need for administration, faculty and staff to be "on board" with regard to the college's mission.

A recurring theme among all the chaplains was that students enter their colleges knowing its religious worldview. One chaplain said, "We ask all students who enroll to live by the values of our church." All of the colleges welcome non-Christians, but assure they understand the ethos of a Christian campus. The chaplains said their schools make no apologies for their beliefs. Students unable to tolerate predominately Christian campuses were encouraged to seek other colleges. None of the chaplains felt their schools were struggling with their religious identity. One chaplain from a large denominational university stated,

I think there's an interesting distinction to be drawn between tolerance and hospitality. We are a very hospitable university, welcoming people of all faiths and of no faith. But just as when you welcome someone into your home, that does not mean you change your core convictions in order to make your guests feel welcome. We are a Christian university, and feel bound to expose our students to the best of the Christian intellectual tradition. But we care for them and respect them regardless of their orientation to that tradition.

Recommendations and Insights

What steps might colleges and universities take to keep a balance between Christianity and other religions? The shift from "tolerant" to "hospitable" appears to be a particularly useful clarification. Tolerance often carries the connotation of dislike or disagreement—"I don't agree, but I'll tolerate you." Few of us wish to be objects of toleration. Hospitality suggests friendly respect for guest and host alike. More importantly, hospitality emphasizes tact, sensitivity and polite acceptance without conformity.

Based upon these chaplains' comments and recent experiences the following recommendations appear to have merit:

1. Clearly articulate one's heritage and mission to incoming employees and students. Clarify the distinction between tolerance and hospitality.
2. Offer religious groups autonomy and privacy. Keep worship and prayer activities exclusive, allowing religious groups to practice their faith without risk of offending others.
3. Inaugurate a hospitality policy toward religions—treat other faiths as you wish yours to be treated. A corollary regarding proselytizing and “evangelical spamming” may be appropriate to foster religious security and respect for privacy.
4. Consider an interfaith council to coordinate and guarantee interfaith peace and respect for others' religious practices.
5. If interfaith activities take place, they should be voluntary and held in a religiously neutral location.

All religions share common elements and make unique, positive contributions that challenge individuals and shape culture and society. The dissemination of these contributions is in keeping with the liberal arts education espoused by most colleges and universities. Philip Novak, in *The World's Wisdom*, states the world's great religious teachings yield inspirational power, instructional value and linkage to the core ideas and values of all humankind.²⁶ Buddhism provides insights into self-denial, Christianity illustrates love and forgiveness, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of right relationships and order, Hinduism demonstrates circumspect thought and meditation, Islam reveals the self-control necessary to fight the “Jihad”²⁷ within us all, Judaism portrays the nobility of righteousness and devotion and the Tao reveals the wisdom of moderation. Self-denial, love, forgiveness, right relationships, order, meditation, self-control, devotion and moderation—are these not what we wish for our students and ourselves?

All of the aforementioned religions prescribe the “Golden Rule” in one form or another. Written in the Christian tradition, Jesus stated:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all of your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the prophets hang on these commandments.²⁸

As Jesus spoke, he quoted a precept that was common knowledge to his audience and had a heritage going back several hundreds, if not thou-

sands of years to the Hindu “Noble Ones,” Moses, Confucius and Buddha.²⁹ His concluding remark marginalizes virtually everything else taught in Judaism and Christianity. In the broadest possible interpretation, this passage suggests devotion to one’s God and treating others with dignity and respect. Is this not what we wish on our campuses?

Berry College Begins a New Year

By the end of the 2001-2002 school year the tolerance discussions subsided as various parties became increasingly sensitive to the others. Dr. Dale McConkey, a soon-to-be ordained Methodist minister and Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology became acting chaplain. Three “paths” regarding religion appear to have emerged. Those walking the first path regard Berry as a “Christian campus,” embracing religious diversity in a Christian context—those of other faiths are welcome as long as they can adapt to a campus that is predominately Christian. Those walking the second path regard Berry as “Christian in spirit,” espouse hospitality and a “Golden Rule” approach—treating others’ religions as they might wish theirs treated. Those walking the third path see Berry’s Christian heritage as an anachronism and think of Berry as a secular school. Most stakeholders at Berry journey the middle path.

During the opening faculty convocation for the 2002-2003 academic year, President Colley reiterated Berry’s Christian heritage and his commitment to a campus that is Christian in spirit. He further encouraged faculty and staff to strive to make Berry a hospitable place for people of all or no faiths. The Provost and acting chaplain echoed these sentiments. The new acting chaplain, Dr. McConkey, unveiled a plan for an interfaith council that unanimously passed the Faculty Assembly a few weeks later. He also encouraged faculty to attend the up-coming 9/11 prayer service to commemorate those who lost their lives in September of 2001.

On the first anniversary of 9/11 Berry College held its second prayer service—without complaints. Yet, the discussion of hospitality and tolerance continues. According to Dr. Thomas Dasher, the Provost of the College, “We are a much healthier community for what we experienced over the past year—but we will continue to experience future debates and discussions if we remain true to our strategic plan and a real commitment to the fundamental issue of diversity at Berry.”³⁰ Debating tolerance has been a healthy, enlightening and perhaps, even binding experience.

Notes

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